

## Chapter 25

### The European Assault on Africa

Paradoxically, the century that saw the near total submission of Africa to European rule began with an effort by Europeans to outlaw their main business in Africa, the slave trade. Responding to both humanitarian and economic arguments, several states, including Denmark, France, the United States, and most importantly, Great Britain, banned slave trading around 1800. Unexpectedly, this led to more, not less, European involvement in Africa. Palm oil, ivory, cocoa, coffee, rubber, and other goods soon replaced slaves as items of trade, and by the 1850s this “legitimate” trade was more profitable for the British than the old slave trade. Then in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, African-European relations underwent a radical transformation, and the whole continent except Liberia and Ethiopia succumbed to European rule.

The takeover took just two decades. It began in earnest in 1878, when King Leopold II of Belgium (r. 1865-1909) and his business associates gained control of lands in the Congo River basin through the efforts of their representative, Welsh explorer Henry M. Stanley (1841-1904). In 1880 Italian-born explorer Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza (1852 – 1905) signed the first of hundreds of treaties with African chieftains that laid the basis for what became the sprawling colony of French Equatorial Africa. In 1881, France established a protectorate over Tunisia, and in 1882 Great Britain occupied Egypt. In 1884 and 1885, thirteen European nations and the United States attended the Congress of Berlin, which established guidelines for the European conquest of Africa. By 1914, when World War I began, Africa had become a vast European colony.

Africans did not passively acquiesce to the European onslaught. Many Africans fought back, but Europe’s artillery, high-explosive shells, and machine guns doomed their efforts. In 1898 the Battle of Omdurman in modern Sudan resulted in some eleven thousand casualties for the Sudanese and forty for the British and their Egyptian troops.

#### *“With the View of Bettering... Our Country”*

During the partition of Africa, African chieftains signed hundreds of treaties that effectively gave European states or trading companies control of African lands and resources. The following document is an example of such a treaty.

This “standard treaty” was utilized in the late 1880s by representatives of the Royal Niger Company, founded in 1879 as the United African Company by the merchant adventurer George Goldie Taubman. Competing with the French for trade on the Niger River outside the control of the African states on the Niger delta, the company was commissioned by Queen Victoria in 1886 as the Royal Niger Company and given a trade monopoly and military and political authority in the region. The numerous treaties it signed with the chieftains of the region served as the basis for the Niger Districts Protectorate, which in turn became the British colony of Nigeria. After receiving the royal charter, the company’s representatives had to move quickly to head off the

French, so they drew up a standard treaty for use throughout the region. One needed only needed to fill in the blanks.

#### *Questions for Analysis*

1. By accepting this treaty, what were the chieftains giving up?
2. What benefits were the African to receive by signing the treaty?
3. What does use of the standard treaty signify about English attitudes toward and knowledge of the Africans?
4. What does the treat indicate about the motives of the British in Africa?

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#### ***Royal Niger Company, STANDARD TREATY***

We, the undersigned Chiefs of \_\_\_\_\_, with the view to the bettering of the condition of our country and people, do this day cede to the Royal Niger Company, for ever, the whole of our territory extending from \_\_\_\_\_.

We also give to the said Royal Niger Company full power to settle all native disputes arising from any cause whatever, and we pledge ourselves not to enter into any war with other tribes without the sanction of the said Royal Niger Company.

We understand that the said Royal Niger Company have full power to mine, farm, and build in any portion of our country.

We bind ourselves not to have any intercourse with any strangers or foreigners except through the said Royal Niger Company.

In consideration of the foregoing, the said Royal Niger Company (Chartered and Limited) bind themselves not to interfere with any of the native laws or customs of the country, consistently with the maintenance of order and good government.

The said Royal Niger Company agree to pay native owners of land a reasonable amount for any portion they may require.

The said Royal Niger Company bind themselves to protect the said Chiefs from the attacks of any neighboring aggressive tribes.

The said Royal Niger Company also agree to pay the said Chiefs \_\_\_\_\_ measures native value.

We, the undersigned witnesses, do hereby solemnly declare that the \_\_\_\_\_ Chiefs whose names are placed opposite their respective crosses have in our presence affixed his signature.

Done in triplicate at \_\_\_\_\_, this \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, 188\_\_.

*Declaration by interpreter:* I, \_\_\_\_\_, of \_\_\_\_\_, do hereby solemnly declare that I am well acquainted with the language of the country, and that on the \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, 188\_\_, I truly and faithfully explained the above Agreement to all the Chiefs present, and that they understood its meaning.